

REVIEW ESSAY

Benjamin Franklin and the Theater of Empire

Benjamin Franklin and the Ends of Empire. By CARLA J. MULFORD.
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bibliography, index. \$65.)

RECENT BOOKS ON BENJAMIN FRANKLIN cast a wide net, placing Franklin within the Atlantic republic of letters and community of scientists as well as the political economy of empire and capitalism.¹ Carla Mulford's *Benjamin Franklin and the Ends of Empire* sheds new light on imperial politics, theories of empire, and Enlightenment ideas throughout the Atlantic world. Her focus on empire builds on a resurgence of imperial history, one that devotes equal attention to center and periphery and gives voice not only to policymakers but to women and men, free colonists and servants, slaves and indigenous peoples.² Influenced by this literature, Mulford incorporates the entire empire—Canada, Ireland, Scotland, and India as well as Britain and her American colonies—into her analysis.

Mulford uses Franklin's writings to interpret his evolving views of the British empire, from his adolescence to the 1780s. She examines his well-known pamphlets, including those on paper money (1729), the Pennsylvania militia (1747), American population (1751), Canada in the empire (1760), and immigration to the new nation (1784); as well, however, she incorporates Franklin's letters and the marginalia he wrote in books he read. This essay will focus on the development of Franklin's the-

¹ David Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* (New York, 2004); Joyce E. Chaplin, *The First Scientific American: Benjamin Franklin and the Pursuit of Genius* (New York, 2006); Alan Houston, *Benjamin Franklin and the Politics of Improvement* (New Haven, 2008); Douglas Anderson, *The Unfinished Life of Benjamin Franklin* (Baltimore, 2012).

² J. P. Marshall, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 2, *The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998).

ory of empire during his Philadelphia and London years, a period analyzed in the most significant parts of the book.

In Mulford's telling, Franklin gradually devised a vision of an egalitarian empire, one in which all its citizens—farmers, artisans, and laborers as well as merchants and gentlemen—shared rights to self-government. Civil liberty, free trade, freedom from coercion, and representative governance—hallmarks of what Mulford (following Annabel Patterson) calls “early modern liberalism”—undergirded Franklin's conception of empire.³ He argued that the ends of empire “ought to be the creation, material support, and protection of the best possible living circumstances for the greatest number of people living within the borders of territories held as one national community” (14).

Franklin built his ideas on empire from his reading of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century British liberal theorists John Milton, John Locke, Algernon Sidney, James Harrington, John Trenchard, Thomas Gordon, Bernard Mandeville, and Daniel Defoe. He drew examples from the English Reformation, seventeenth-century revolutions, and contemporary politics. His Indian negotiations, conflicts with Pennsylvania's proprietors, parliamentary lobbying, imperial politics in India, and travels in Britain and Europe informed his theories of empire.

Franklin began to examine the empire in the late 1720s. He framed his 1729 tract *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper-Currency* around writings of English political economists, especially William Petty, and colonial supporters of paper money. Since British authorities could veto colonial legislation, it was necessary for Franklin to deal with the nature of the empire in his discussion of the controversy. He conceived of the empire, Mulford reports, as an interconnected whole, in which British prosperity depended on the prosperity of its colonies—Pennsylvania, with its busy port of Philadelphia, foremost among them. In his view, a new paper money emission would make exchange easier and thereby improve Pennsylvania's trade; trade, in turn, would attract immigrants to settle frontier lands and make goods Britain needed.

Mulford's discussion of Franklin's *Modest Inquiry* is the best I have read, but it misses how Franklin tweaked the class implications of earlier writings. English and colonial exponents of paper currency emphasized commerce and those who conducted it; Franklin stressed farmers and handicraft workers. In his 1664 *England's Treasure by Forraign Trade*, Thomas

³ Annabel Patterson, introduction to *Early Modern Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1997).

Mun wrote that paper money would give opportunities “to the *younger* & *poorer* Merchants to rise in the world, and to enlarge their holdings” (90–91). In contrast, Franklin praised “Labouring and Handicrafts Men (which are the chief Strength and Support of a People).” Paper money emissions benefitted “*Brickmakers, Bricklayers, Masons, Carpenters, Joiners, Glaziers*, and several other Trades immediately employ’d by Building, but likewise to *Farmers, Brewers, Bakers, Taylors, Shoemakers, Shop-keepers*, and . . . every one that they lay their Money out with.”⁴

The Pennsylvania debates over paper money emissions, moreover, were three-sided: opponents, who feared debasement of the currency; supporters like Franklin, who emphasized that paper money would benefit all classes; and radicals, who accused opponents of paper money of class tyranny. Franklin himself indulged in conspiratorial language in an addendum to a “Busy-Body” essay he wrote for the *American Weekly Mercury*, one soon suppressed as incendiary. In that addendum, Franklin demanded opponents of paper currency recant or else face charges they “Design to engross the Property of the Country and make themselves and their Posterity Lords, and the Bulk of the Inhabitants their Tenants and Vassals.”⁵ Such charges percolated through Philadelphia. Three anonymous pamphlets (1725 and 1729) bitterly tore into Pennsylvania’s ruling class. They alleged that “Men of Wealth and Learning,” allied with the proprietor, had conspired to steal the property of artisans and farmers and deny them a subsistence. These pamphlets called the rich tyrants, extortioners, usurers, misers, criminals, oppressors, knaves, crafties (evil-doers), imps (children of Satan), and designing men.⁶

Conflicts between Pennsylvania’s proprietors and the Quaker-dominated Assembly led Franklin to develop his theory of empire. Navigating the conflict between pacifist Quakers, backcountry settlers who demanded protection, and proprietors who refused to pay taxes, he created voluntary militias. The central issues centered on the taxation of proprietary estates and using those funds to pay for the defense of the col-

⁴ Benjamin Franklin (hereafter BF), *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper-Currency* (Philadelphia, 1729), 8–10, 34.

⁵ “The *Busy Body*. No. 8,” *American Weekly Mercury*, Mar. 27, 1729; J. A. Leo Lemay, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 2005–8), 1:391–95, and “Franklin’s Suppressed ‘Busy-Body,’” *American Literature* 37 (1965): 307–11.

⁶ *A Dialogue between Mr. Robert Rich, and Roger Plowman* (Philadelphia, 1725), 1–2 (tyrants, extortioners, usurers); *The Triumvirate of Pennsylvania in a Letter to a Friend in the Country* (Philadelphia, 1725), 1, 3–4 (misers, criminals, oppressors; quote on 3); *A Revisal of the Intreagues of the Triumvirate . . .* (Philadelphia, 1729), 1–2 (tyrants, crafties, imps, designing men).

ony, particularly those in the West, where, Franklin wrote, the colony paid “yearly heavy Expences in cultivating and maintaining Friendship with the Indians” (178). While the Penns denied the Assembly could impose taxes on them and demanded residents pay their quit rents, the Assembly (with Franklin writing remonstrances) insisted that their charter gave them the right to legislate for the colony and tax all property holders. By following his instructions, the governor, Franklin wrote, had subjected “a free People to the abject State of Vassalage” (179). Franklin’s objections failed to persuade British officials, who vetoed Pennsylvania laws, to force the Penns to pay taxes save for those on improved estates, and that at the lowest rate.

Franklin lived in Pennsylvania through explosive immigration from German states. At first he had welcomed German immigrants, writing in 1747 that they would shed their ethnicity and defend their “*newly acquired* and most precious *Liberty and Property*” as citizens of the empire.⁷ Soon, however, he began to fear German immigrants and even urged Britain to limit German immigration. Following eighteenth-century ethnography, he dubbed the Germans as aliens marked by “a swarthy Complexion” (162). Poor German immigrants worked for low wages, and German farmers exhausted the soil of lands they cultivated. He doubted their loyalty to British institutions. Germans kept to themselves and refused to learn English, reducing the linguistic and ethnic unity that made the colony British. If German immigration continued, Franklin warned, Germans would chase out Britons, and Pennsylvania would “become a German Colony” (160).

In Mulford’s reading, Indians complicated Franklin’s vision of empire. He had long read treaty proceedings, and—fascinated with natural men living in a state of savagery—began publishing them in 1736. The treaties showed the British the complexity of Indian cultures and alliances. Later, he helped negotiate treaties himself. He knew that the empire had to acquire more Indian land in order to prosper. As he wrote in his *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind* (1751), Indians needed vast hunting territories to subsist; nonetheless, he thought they had more than they needed and might part with some of it, moving out of the way of advanced cultivators. Still, land transfers required fair treaties that extinguished Indian land titles, a process made more difficult by conflicts between Indian nations and colonial land thievery.

⁷ BF, *Plain Truth: or, Serious Considerations On the Present State of the City of Philadelphia, and Province of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1747), 21.

The French, with their unified colonial policy, had an advantage over the disunited English colonies; their alliances with Indians rendered American frontiers insecure. Franklin expected the French and these allies to murder British traders, “scalp our Farmers, with their Wives and Children,” and conquer British territory, thus destroying “the British Interest, Trade and Plantations in America” (130–31). To negotiate with Indians, in 1754 he formulated his Albany Plan of Union; it would have established a trans-colonial governing body, with representatives from each colony and an executive chosen by the crown. His “Join, or Die” cartoon, which represented colonies as separate parts of a snake, emphasized the necessity of unity. The urgency was clear: Franklin sent the cartoon, annotated by a paragraph detailing French atrocities, to Pennsylvania’s agent in London, asking him to have the cartoon printed in London papers. By preventing private agreements between Indians and whites, the plan would have been fair to both settlers and Indians. But neither Whitehall nor any of the colonies accepted it.⁸

“Trade, defense, and empire,” Mulford writes, were “intricately intertwined” (139). Although Franklin wanted the colonies to acquire Indian land, he lambasted traders or settlers who sold rum to Indians, stole Indian land, or massacred peaceable Indians. He feared that the 1764 murders of peaceable Indians by the frontier Paxton Boys might trigger an Indian war. Since imperial security depended on treating Indians fairly and protecting Indian allies, the British empire might be at risk if such practices persisted. He urged British authorities to defend Indian allies and license only fair traders to deal with Indians.

At the same time Franklin dealt with Indians, he conceived of a spacious empire, inhabited by Britons on both sides of the Atlantic. The empire had gained strength from the abundant, unimproved acres in the colonies that inhabitants and British immigrants could acquire. The industry of its free inhabitants, Franklin wrote, had “made a Garden of a Wilderness” (116). With access to land, the colonial population grew rapidly, Franklin argued in his *Observations on the Increase of Mankind* and in his 1760 *Interest of Great Britain Considered* (“Canada” pamphlet). Colonists should be free to engage in manufacturing, he argued, but if the empire secured their land, sons of farmers and craftsmen alike would become independent farmers.

⁸ BF to Richard Partridge, May 8, 1754, in Leonard W. Labaree et al., eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (hereafter *PBF*), 41 vols. to date (New Haven, CT, 1959—), 5:272–75, found at <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-05-02-0085>.

As the population grew, farm production rose, sustaining colonial prosperity, creating demand for British manufactures, and turning Pennsylvania into a center of international trade. Keeping Canada—rather than French islands—after the Seven Years' War, he predicted in 1760, would accelerate farm production, natural population increase, and colonial demand for manufactures.

To support British prosperity, Britain insisted on constraining American trade, limiting manufacturing, and forcing colonies to send raw goods to the motherland. Colonies, moreover, had to pay for colonial wars, further impoverishing them. Such British actions led Franklin to intensify his egalitarian imperial ethos. Britons had the same heritage, no matter their residence, and Americans deserved the same rights to self-government—controlling immigration (including forbidding the importation of convict servants), enforcing laws their assemblies passed, collecting taxes they needed—as those who lived in Britain. With those rights, colonists would join to defend and improve the empire.

Franklin further sharpened his vision of empire in December 1750 letters to Massachusetts governor William Shirley. Parliament—where no colonists served—was too distant and too ignorant of colonial affairs to legislate for them, he argued, for rather than governing in the best interests of colonists, appointed governors and placemen sought only profit. Colonists—while owing loyalty to the British king—must control their destinies. He toyed with the idea of the colonies gaining seats in Parliament, even though he knew English representatives would greatly outnumber them. For this to work, Parliament must repeal *all* the colonial legislation they had passed before seating such representatives. Then, with American representatives present, they could debate the legislation they had repealed. This strategy, Franklin thought, might reduce the power of lobbyists who wanted to protect London's trade.

Franklin brilliantly navigated what Mulford calls "London's theater of empire." While in London, he honed his performances, carefully framing his writing, testimony, and gestures to his intended audiences, often subtly changing his vision of empire to meet immediate political needs. He argued in tracts, newspaper articles, hoaxes, and cartoons that all citizens of the empire had the same rights. Building on his fame as a scientist, he placed at least 134 pieces in the London press—satires, hoaxes, theories of empire, and political defenses of the colonies foremost among them.⁹

Mulford's analysis should be extended. Franklin's preparation for hearings on repeal of the Stamp Act before the Committee of the Whole of the House

⁹ Verner W. Crane, ed., *Benjamin Franklin's Letters to the Press, 1758–1775* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1950).

of Commons demonstrates his mastery of the theater of empire. Before his testimony, he “was extreamly busy, attending Members of both Houses, informing, explaining, consulting, disputing, in a continual Hurry from Morning to Night.”¹⁰ Franklin not only lobbied Parliament but had a friend, printer William Strahan, publish his letters to Governor Shirley, signing them as “Lover of Britain.” Astute readers might have identified Franklin as the author, given the way Strahan praised Franklin in the introduction.

In January 1766, Franklin penned two caustic satires in the tradition of Jonathan Swift’s *Modest Proposal*. The second, sharper satire, signed “Pacifcus,” opened with an epigram: “Pax quaeritur Bello” (“Peace is sought by war”)—Oliver Cromwell’s motto, found on coinage minted during the Protectorate.¹¹ Pacifcus began by dubbing the colonists “amazingly stupid” for trying to distinguish “between Power and Right, as tho’ the former did not always imply the latter.” A conqueror could enforce any law, even if “contrary to the Laws of Nature, and the common Rights of Mankind.” These colonists, descended from “outrageous Assertors of Civil and Religious Liberties,” would not “tamely give up what they call their natural, their constitutional Rights,” but Parliament must “insist upon an absolute Submission” to the stamp tax.¹²

Pacifcus demanded war against the rebellious colonials. Five or six thousand Highlanders and Canadians should burn colonial capitals, destroy all shipping, and “cut the Throats of all the Inhabitants, Men, Women, and Children, and scalp them, to serve as an Example.” If these deaths depopulated the colonies and bankrupted English manufacturers, then England could send its unemployed laborers, along with its felons, to the colonies “to make up for any Deficiency which example made it necessary to sacrifice for the Public Good.” After such cleansing, “Great Britain might then reign over a loyal and submissive People.”¹³

By pointing to savagery and conquest as the only way to enforce the Stamp Act, Franklin made clear the necessity of repeal. A cartoon went further, showing that enforcement would ruin the empire. Later entitled

¹⁰ BF to Lord Kames, Feb. 25, 1767, in *PBF*, 14:64, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-14-02-0032>.

¹¹ Antonia Fraser, *Cromwell, The Lord Protector* (New York, 1973), 457, illustration between 458 and 459, 590. Edwin Wolf 2nd, “Benjamin Franklin’s Stamp Act Cartoon,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 99 (1955): 388–96, 389, guided me to the following sources: BF, “Pacifcus Secundus’: Reply to ‘Pacifcus,’” Jan. 2, 1766, in *PBF*, 13:4–6, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-13-02-0002> (quotes); BF, “Pacifcus’: Pax Quaeritur Bello,” Jan. 23, 1766, in *PBF*, 13:54–58, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-13-02-0019>.

¹² BF, “Pacifcus’: Pax Quaeritur Bello,” Jan. 23, 1766, in *PBF*, 13:54–58, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-13-02-0019>.

¹³ *Ibid.*

"Magna Britannia: her Colonies Reduc'd," it shows the empire, pictured as an impoverished woman, leaning on a globe, her limbs—labeled "Virg, Pennsylv, New York, and New Eng"—severed from her body. Franklin put the cartoon on cards, writing messages on the obverse side, and gave them to members of Parliament. As he wrote his sister Jane Mecom, he had circulated the cards "during the Time it was debated here whether it might not be proper to reduce the Colonies to Obedience by Force of Arms: The Moral is, that the Colonies may be ruined, but that Britain would thereby be maimed."¹⁴

Franklin's testimony on February 13, 1766, followed petitions urging repeal from London, Glasgow, and outport merchants, who feared "utter ruin." Parliament had heard testimony of at least five merchants involved in colonial trade and five stocking manufacturers. Seeking repeal, the Rockingham ministry made sure that all witnesses had an economic interest in the act: the merchants insisted that trade would not revive until boycotts ended after the act was repealed; the manufacturers reported laying off men.¹⁵

After such preparation, Franklin's lengthy (three to four hour) testimony of February 13, 1766, was masterful, full of *bon mots* and arguments that would lead members of Parliament, already supportive of repeal, to rescind the act. Franklin answered 174 questions, nearly equally divided between those posed by supporters and opponents of repeal.¹⁶ Four themes emerged from his testimony: the burdensome taxation the Stamp Act imposed, the impossibility of enforcing the Stamp Act, the willingness of colonists to forego amenities and replace British manufactures with their own, and the proper relationship between the colonies and Britain in the empire.

Pennsylvanians, particularly poor frontier farmers, Franklin insisted, already paid high taxes; much of this tax money had paid for troops during the Seven Years' War. The Stamp Act aimed at the poor and would further impoverish them. Nor was there enough specie in the colonies to pay for

¹⁴Wolf, "Franklin's Stamp Act Cartoon," 389–90; "Magna Britannia: Her Colonies Reduc'd," Jan.–Feb. 1766, in *PBF*, 13:66–69, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-13-02-0023>; BF to Jane Mecom, Mar. 1, 1766, in *PBF*, 13:189, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-13-02-0055>.

¹⁵R. C. Simmons and P. D. G. Thomas, eds., *Proceedings and Debates of the British Parliaments Respecting North America, 1754–1783*, vol. 2, 1765–68 (Millwood, NY, 1983), 95–97 (quote 96), 108–10, 115, 118–23, 185–218.

¹⁶"Examination before the Committee of the Whole of the House of Commons, 13 February 1766," in *PBF*, 13:124–62, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-13-02-0035>; Peter Charles Hoffer, ed., *Benjamin Franklin Explains the Stamp Act Protests to Parliament, 1766* (New York, 2016).

the stamped paper. When asked about enforcing the Stamp Act, Franklin repeatedly replied that colonists would never pay for the stamped paper “unless compelled by force of arms,” nor would they accept any pared-down stamp or similar direct tax. If everyone refused to buy stamped paper, military force would backfire. If Britain invaded, “they will not find a rebellion; they may indeed make one.”¹⁷

Franklin insisted that colonists deemed any parliamentary tax “unconstitutional and unjust” because they elected no representatives to Parliament. Playing down his more radical assertions implying that Parliament could not legislate for the colonies, he suggested that Parliament could pass and enforce any laws, as long as they did not directly tax the inhabitants. He pretended that colonists objected to internal taxes but not to external ones, like duties on imported goods used to pay for maintaining freedom of the seas. When the colonies needed to finance war, provincial assemblies would provide for it, in response to voluntary parliamentary requisitions.

Questioners pushed Franklin, toward the end of his testimony, to relate the constitutional underpinnings for his assertion that Parliament had no right to impose internal taxes on the colonies. Although Parliament had the sole right to tax the realm, it did not extend across the ocean, he answered. Colonies had their own assemblies and took on, in this regard, the rights of Parliament. Even if Pennsylvania’s charter allowed Parliament to tax the colonies, he argued, that charter had granted Pennsylvanians “all the privileges and liberties of Englishmen,” which included the right “not to be taxed but by their common consent.”¹⁸

Franklin invented a mythic, industrious, American public—one able to prosper without paying for stamped paper. If the act was not repealed, he predicted, colonists would “take very little of your manufacture in a short time.” He did not “know a single article imported into the Northern Colonies but what they can either do without, or make themselves.” They had made progress in cloth manufacture—the key British export—having increased wool production enough to become self-sufficient in three years: “Before their old clothes are worn out, they will have new ones of their own making.” Of course, if Parliament repealed the Stamp Act, colonial manufactures would be discouraged.¹⁹

¹⁷ “Examination before the Committee,” in *PBF*, 13:134 (question 31), 142 (questions 82–83).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, in *PBF*, 13:155–56 (questions 152–53).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, in *PBF*, 13:139–40 (question 60), 143 (questions 84–87).

Twice during the session, Franklin was asked by supporters of repeal to compare the “temper of America toward Great Britain” in 1763 with that of 1766. Ignoring rampant smuggling, he insisted that the “temper” in 1763 had been “the best in the world.” Colonists had “submitted willingly to the government of the Crown” and obeyed parliamentary acts. They considered “parliament as the great bulwark and security of their liberty and privileges.” But now, the temper was “much altered” and their “respect for parliament” “greatly lessened.” Franklin asserted at the end of his testimony that before the Stamp Act, the pride of Americans was “to indulge in the fashions and manufactures of Great Britain,” but now they took pride in wearing “their old cloaths over again, till they can make new ones.”²⁰

Mulford persuasively argues that Franklin had become disillusioned with Parliament and the ministry years before 1774, when Alexander Wedderburn excoriated him before the Privy Council for leaking Massachusetts governor Thomas Hutchinson’s correspondence. In 1767, Franklin complained to Lord Kames that “Every Man in England seems to consider himself as a Piece of a Sovereign over America . . . and talks of OUR *Subjects in the Colonies*” (214). His argument that colonists ought to control taxation and legislate on internal issues fell on deaf ears. As he wrote to his son William in 1768, he was “weary of suggesting them to so many different inattentive heads, though I must continue to it while I stay among them.” Only two alternatives existed: either Parliament “has a power to make *all laws* for us” or “*no laws*”—and he thought the latter more persuasive (218). Such musings inevitably justified rebellion.

Mulford demonstrates that even before Franklin visited Ireland in 1771, he had used British oppression there as an example of what might happen to the American colonies. By the 1750s, he had read William Molyneux’s *The Case of Ireland’s being Bound by Acts of Parliament* (1698), which argued that because England had never conquered Ireland, Parliament could not legislate for it—an idea Franklin applied to the colonies. His 1771 trip there horrified him; he saw the racked rents, poverty, and hunger Irish peasants suffered at the hands of their absentee landlords and Parliament, whose members cared not at all for either the Irish or the American colonists. The oppression the Irish faced might thus become the fate of the colonists.

²⁰ Ibid., in *PBF*, 13:135–36 (questions 36–37, 40–41), 159 (questions 173–74).

Franklin developed a theory of divided sovereignty in the empire, details of which he laid out in a June 1770 letter to the Reverend Samuel Cooper of Boston's Brattle Street Church. Parliament enjoyed sovereignty over Britain; since "colonies originally were constituted distinct States," colonial assemblies ruled over their own territories. Such rights were not only consistent with the liberties the English had always enjoyed, but colonial charters granted the colonies the same rights. Given this divided sovereignty, Britain had no right to keep a standing army in any colony, unless its assembly agreed. He had tired of hearing "*The supreme Authority of Parliament; The Subordinacy of our Assemblies to the Parliament and the like*," claims "founded only on Usurpation," and words without meaning if assemblies and the king shared legislative authority.²¹

As Mulford documents, no one in Parliament, even Franklin's allies, shared his vision. Not even his 1773 hoax "Edict of the King of Prussia"—which threw British arguments back at them by claiming that the British owed the Germans, who had colonized Britain, obedience and taxes—made any difference. Franklin's parliamentary opponents, who read the same writers as he did, came to vastly different conclusions about the empire. In the name of parliamentary sovereignty, their ancestors had overthrown two kings, executing one of them, and fought a bloody civil war. Parliament had the right to legislate for colonies and to enforce laws it passed. Far from indulging in self-interest, its members insisted, parliamentary laws benefitted everyone in the empire. Hardly essential to the prosperity of the empire, the continental colonies had become intransigent and unwilling to pay for their own defense.

Franklin stayed in London more than a year after Wedderburn's attack and continued to lobby his remaining parliamentary friends. He knew that his vision of an empire of equals lacked parliamentary support and that most members remained ignorant of colonial conditions. As Wedderburn impinged his integrity, Franklin stood erect, showing no emotion—a conventional genteel practice. He and his allies orchestrated a campaign in the London press vilifying Wedderburn and defending Franklin's stoic behavior at the Privy Council; Wedderburn's allies took months to respond to this onslaught.²²

As Mulford demonstrates, decades before the break with Britain, Franklin's loyalty to this empire had become contingent on its British

²¹ BF to Samuel Cooper, June 8, 1770, in *PBF*, 16:162–63, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-17-02-0090>; Mulford examines and quotes part of this letter on 242–43.

²² This assertion is based on articles about the controversy found in the Burney newspaper database, <http://www.gale.com/17th-and-18th-century-burney-collection>.

rulers defending the liberty of all citizens, no matter their residence, and allowing them to pursue whatever opportunities they might find, unconstrained by regulations that prohibited any industry or closed any part of the world to trade. His vision of empire resembles a constitutional monarchy, much like the mid-twentieth-century British Commonwealth of Nations, with its political independence under a ceremonial monarch. In this imagined empire, colonists would choose their leaders and enjoy the same rights as voters in Britain. When the empire refused to abide by these standards, Franklin's loyalty loosened and finally broke.

The evidence Mulford presents challenges conventional understandings of Franklin's class position and thereby suggests a different accounting of the origins of Franklin's spacious empire—one that she might reject. Franklin's ambiguous class identity—his search for a place in a world dominated by aristocrats or would-be aristocrats throughout the Atlantic world—may have driven his desire for an egalitarian empire. Franklin's search for his family's historical roots, the portraits he sat for, and his decision to stay in London well after his political effectiveness ended provide evidence for this argument.

Franklin's ideal empire embraced an anti-aristocratic polity, one in which his class origins played a significant role. He first learned about his ancestors from his uncle Benjamin. His search took on urgency when he reached London and learned that his supposedly low origins reduced his political influence. During his 1758 visit to his ancestral home in Ecton, he discovered that his family stood near the top of the English social hierarchy, just below the gentry; they were members of a class that aspired to gentility, even aristocracy. It was unheard of for such a family as the Franklins to persist in a single village for three centuries. His family owned thirty acres, a huge holding, and enjoyed the patronage of the local gentleman, available to few villagers. His ancestors included intellectuals, local notables, yeoman landowners, and substantial artisans. Less than one in twelve Englishmen—clergy, gentlemen, lawyers—acquired his uncles' level of literacy. Nor did his status as youngest son, descended from youngest sons over five generations, suggest downward mobility. Two uncles, sons of a youngest son, did well. In this they were representative; English yeomen often gave land to younger as well as oldest sons.²³

²³ Leonard W. Larabee et al., eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, CT, 1964), 45–50; BF to Deborah Franklin, Sept. 6, 1758, in *PBF*, 8:133–38, 143–46, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-08-02-0034>; Peter H. Lindert, "Unequal English Wealth since 1670," *Journal of Political Economy* 94 (1986): 1136–39; Margaret Spufford, *Contrasting Communities: English Villagers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1974), 85–87, 104–11, 161–64.

Franklin imagined a new ruling class—a new gentility—one far from the leisured wealth and luxury of aristocrats. He chose not to build a rural estate—the symbol of aristocracy or aristocratic pretensions in the Atlantic world. Instead, like city merchants, he constructed a large townhouse. The paintings he sat for showed a similar anti-aristocratic sensibility. The two London portraits pictured Franklin in genteel (but not aristocratic) clothing, conducting electrical experiments. French images depict him in the clothing intellectuals wore or in a plebeian fur cap, one that symbolized American republican virtue.²⁴

Images Franklin designed himself—the “Join, or Die” cartoon (1754), “Magna Britannica” (1765–66), and the small value Continental bills (1776)—exemplified Franklin’s bourgeois conception of empire. The divided snake and the central trope of “Join, or Die” deliberately left Britain—and ideas of superiority—out; each colony is shown as separate from but equal to the others. Snakes evoked the virile American wilderness and the equality supposedly found there. “Magna Britannica” depicts the colonies as the severed limbs of a female Britannia—each colony viewed equally. No aristocratic imagery appears, and the empire appears as a subset of the entire world. The design of four Continental bills suggests unity and the absence of hierarchy. They depict each new state as an interlocking ring, attached to its neighbor; in the center of the thirteen rings, the words “American Congress” and “We Are One” radiate outward from the sun.²⁵

Franklin’s continued residence in London complicates Mulford’s analysis of Franklin’s vision of empire. Why did he stay in London long after he realized his political effectiveness had ended? He surely wanted to argue, against all odds, for colonial self-governance in a constitutional empire and to repair his reputation after Wedderburn’s savage attack. But he also stayed to participate in the imagined community of enlightened people that formed around him—friends, other scientists, political thinkers—at his clubs or their homes.

A vision of a spacious empire that encompassed the Atlantic world helps explain Franklin’s extended stay in London. This reading suggests that Franklin viewed the British empire as a part of the Atlantic republic of letters and science, one that united enlightened men in the colonies of

²⁴The best description of these images remains Charles Coleman Sellers, *Benjamin Franklin in Portraiture* (New Haven, CT, 1962).

²⁵Lester C. Olson, *Benjamin Franklin’s Vision of American Community: A Study in Rhetorical Iconology* (Columbia, SC, 2004).

European powers to the British and French monarchies, along with others throughout Europe. These politically independent empires, monarchies, and republics shared Enlightenment views of the world. The science of governance, much like the science of electricity, required experimentation, evidence, and a collaborative community. The rulers of enlightened states—well-read men of letters—might resemble Franklin. They would preserve the economic independence, political rights, and religious freedom of the citizenry. Verily, Franklin became, as the late eighteenth-century term had it, a citizen of the world.

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